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From Enslavement to Entrepreneurship: Elizabeth Keckley Designer and Dressmaker

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Background

Women entrepreneurs encounter challenges that are different from their male counterparts, such as, access to financial capital as well as fewer mentors and support networks (Moore & Buttner, 1997). These typical challenges, plus her experience as a slave, add intrigue to Elizabeth Keckley's story. Before she gained prominence as Mary Todd Lincoln's personal dressmaker, Elizabeth Keckley was an African American slave who bought her own freedom by way of her entrepreneurial pursuits initiated on the plantation. Some writings detail Keckley's relationship with the first lady, less has focused on Keckley as a designer, dressmaker and entrepreneur.

Research Questions and Purpose

At the onset of this study, the researchers pondered: (a) What can we learn about Keckley as a designer, dressmaker and entrepreneur from her autobiography published in 1868 entitled, *Behind the Scenes, Or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House?*,¹ (b) What do garments owned by Mary Todd Lincoln and others attributed to Keckley as the designer and dressmaker tell us about Keckley's design aesthetic and construction methods as a designer and dressmaker?, (c) What tools did Keckley use to construct her designs and construct garments?, and (d) What methods, as a former slave, did Keckley use to establish herself as an entrepreneur during the time period prior to emancipation of African Americans and during the reconstruction period in the United States? Therefore, the purpose of this research was to learn from Keckley's words, artifacts and objects she created to understand her role and impact as an African American designer, dressmaker and entrepreneur.

Methods and Theoretical Foundation

The researchers employed historical research methods, Jules Prown's material culture framework and Liebhlich et al. and Riessman's narrative analysis approaches to analyze texts and artifacts. Items studied were references to design and dressmaking in Keckley's autobiography, artifacts owned by Keckley such as her sewing machine² and dressmaking tools, and visual photographic analysis of photos of Mary Todd Lincoln and others attributed to Keckley as the designer and/or dressmaker. Intersectionality, a Black feminist perspective (Crenshaw, 1991) was the theoretical framework used to understand how Keckley's identities, such as, gender, race, class, age, and geographic location impacted her life as a designer and dressmaker. In a 2013 interview about Keckley for Smithsonian.com, Elizabeth Way, a former Smithsonian researcher indicated, "A thorough study of her dressmaking legacy is still being uncovered."

¹ Keckley's narrative was republished in 1988 by Oxford University Press.

² Keckley's sewing machine is in the collection at the Chicago History Museum.

Findings

Despite the white male patriarchal ideal of the “true woman” that prevailed during the nineteenth century, Keckley was able to establish her own identity as an entrepreneur, even as a slave. The objects studied, communicate that as a Black female entrepreneur during the 1880s Keckley experienced significant challenges. However, she used garment design and dressmaking to forge a business that not only supported herself financially, but employed other seamstresses.

Significance

Black entrepreneurs tend to succeed in what Bates (1997) coined “traditional lines of black enterprise” such as barbering, hair styling, restaurants and music. For Black entrepreneurs, entry into these areas is usually easier as they require little start-up cost and “are protected by the distinct taste of their coethnic clientele” and therefore there is less competition from other cultural groups (Lee, 1999, P.1404). Keckley’s experiences as a Black entrepreneur during the 1800s, refutes this assertion, as she started an apparel business and catered to those outside her ethnic group. The study of Keckley’s autobiography, artifacts, and photographs of garments she designed and constructed provide detailed insight into the work of a historical Black female entrepreneur who has mainly been known only as a personal dressmaker for Mrs. Lincoln and other affluent women during the antebellum period. This investigation of Keckley, through a Black feminist lens, provides a foundation for future studies of current Black female entrepreneurs in the apparel and textile industries.

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